

LutheranWoman

May 2004

TODAY

PROCESSED

APR 12 2004

STU LIBRARY

\$2.00

matthew 18

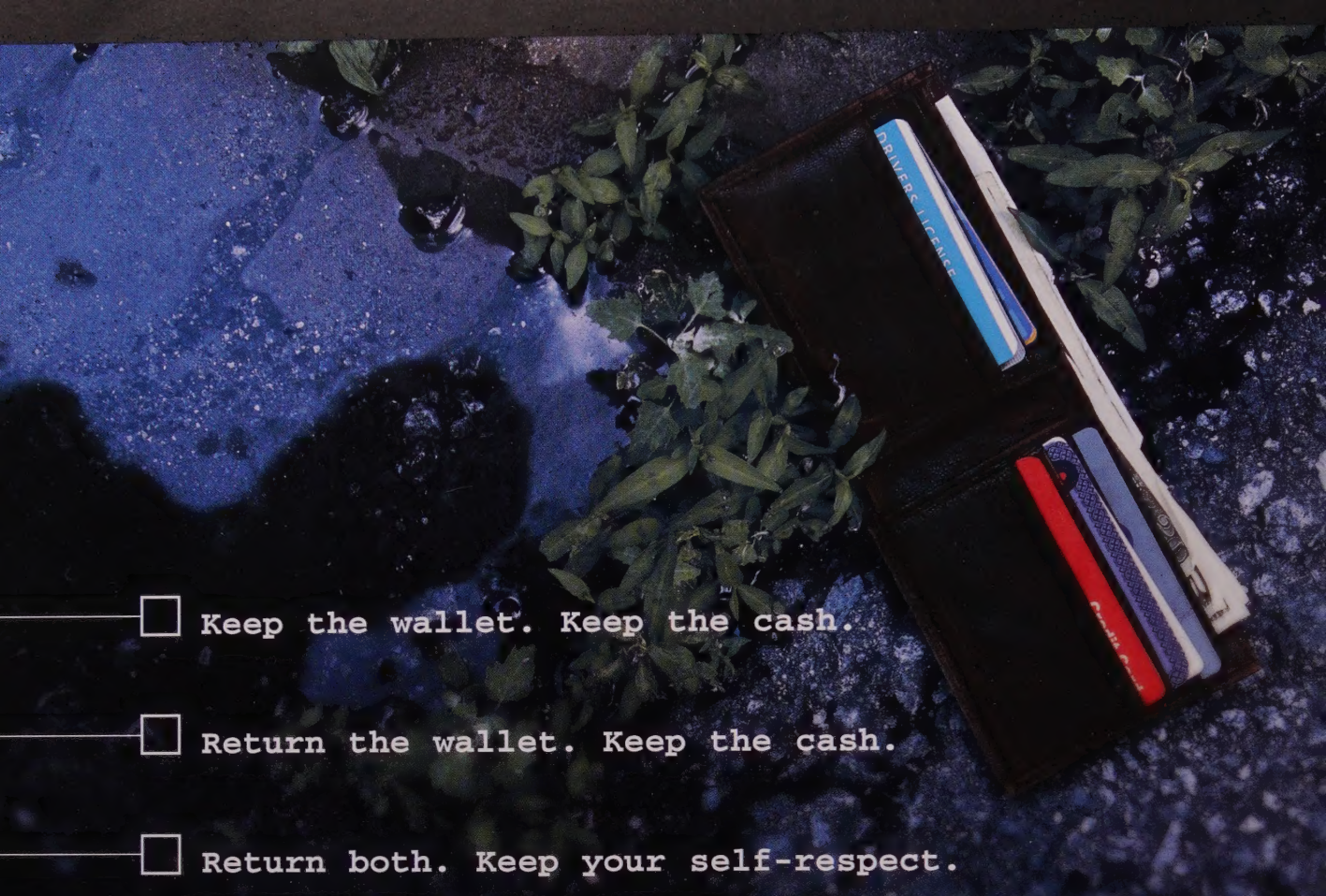


conflict


Facing Conflict Faithfully

Bold Gentleness



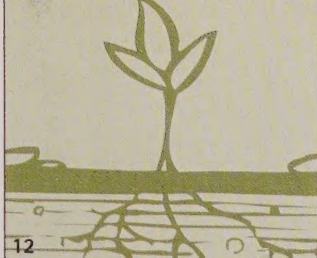
- 
- ☐ Keep the wallet. Keep the cash.
 - ☐ Return the wallet. Keep the cash.
 - ☐ Return both. Keep your self-respect.

The choices we make and the lives we lead are driven by the values we hold. Maybe that's why nearly 3 million people choose to be members of Thrivent Financial for Lutherans. We offer a wide range of financial products, from insurance and annuities to investments. What's more, we understand what our members value most: protecting and providing for their families, and giving back to their congregations and communities. Find out how we can help with your life choices, contact one of our financial associates, call 800-THRIVENT or visit thrivent.com

 **Thrivent Financial for Lutherans™**

Where Values Thrive.™

Securities offered through a registered representative of Thrivent Investment Management Inc., 625 Fourth Ave. S., Minneapolis, MN 55415-1665, 800-THRIVENT (800-847-4836), a wholly owned subsidiary of Thrivent Financial for Lutherans. Member NASD. Member SIPC. 21784 N9-03 © Thrivent Financial for Lutherans 2003



Editor Nancy Goldberger
Managing Editor Barbara Hofmaier

Contributing Editor Deb Bogaert
Copy Editor Audrey Novak Riley
Assistant Editor Beth McBride

Art Direction On Track Visual
 Communications

Cover Cheryl Knecht

DEPARTMENTS

VOLUME 17 NUMBER 4 MAY 2004

- 4 Editor's Note and Letter
- 5 Give Us This Day
- 10 Mothering Seasons
- 16 Sermon in the Spotlight
- 19 IdeaNet
- 27 Reader Call
- 28 Bookmarks
- 30 Women of the ELCA
Global Spotlight

God's Comforting Arms *Marj Leegard*

Celebrating the Village *Anne Basye*

Ascension: When Absence Is Presence *Kathryn Vitalis Hoffman*

How does your women's group show God's love to people who are not part of a congregation?

Tell us about a friendship that has stood the test of time. What have you learned from that friendship?

Rejoice in the Gentleness of the Day *Gayle Aldrich*

Thank You, God, for Giving Us Sisters *Kristin Svidersky*

- 32 Bible Study
I Thank God for You!
Forming Community with Paul

Session 9: **Prosper in the Gospel** Paul and the Philippians were very close. Now, in light of his impending execution, Paul addresses four troubling situations before concluding his letter. *Robin Mattison*

- 41 Grace Notes
- 42 Amen!

One of the Clan *Linda Post Bushkofsky*

Known by Our Gentleness *Catherine Malotky*

REJOICE IN THE LORD ALWAYS

- 6 Facing Conflict Faithfully
- 12 Dreams of Love
- 22 Bold Gentleness

Do you shy away from conflict? We examine some ways to face and embrace this challenging aspect of life. *Susan M. Lang*

In the 1950s, a few Coptic Christian nuns in Egypt dreamt of being examples of God's love in the world. Today, the Bayad retreat center testifies to the miracles that can happen when women dare to dream. *Nelly van Doorn-Harder*

What does it mean when Paul exhorts us to let our gentleness be evident to all, and what impact does bold gentleness make in our world today? *Joan D. Chittister*

PLUS . . .

- 20 An Undelivered Eulogy
- 21 Question of the Month
- 39 Keep Pouring It On!
- 43 Directory of Reader Services

A poetic reflection. *K. S. Hardy*

This month's question and your answers concerning how you share your faith.

An update on the 90-Ton Challenge (LWR Coffee Project). *Brenda Meier*

Valuable information for every reader.



EDITOR'S NOTE & LETTER

Dear Readers,

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice!" This jubilant exclamation, drawn from the Scripture text for the last session of the "I Thank God for You!" Bible study, provides our theme for this issue of *LWT*.

The first two verses of the study text, however, are not about rejoicing. Philippians 4:2-23 begins with a plea that two followers, Euodia and Syntyche, "be of the same mind in the Lord." But Paul doesn't stop there. He asks the recipients of his letter to act as a supportive community to these two women who have struggled beside him in the work of the gospel.

You will discover the significance of this statement in the course of the Bible study, but I want to encourage you to remember Paul's plea as you read the articles by Sister Joan Chittister and Susan Lang. Writing about the phrase "be of the same mind," Chittister gives us much to ponder. Likewise, Lang addresses the issue of facing conflict. When, you may wonder, do we get to the rejoicing? Perhaps the first step toward rejoicing is taken when we embrace the struggle. As challenging as conflict can be, the profit from actively engaging in such situations can certainly lead us to mighty rejoicing.

But we didn't stop there. The other articles in this issue illuminate ways in which we can better honor our relationship with God through our relationship with others. Certainly that is worth rejoicing about!

Nancy Goldberger, editor

Letter to the Editor

After reading Clare La Plante's article, "Strength in Numbers" (January/February 2004), I wanted to share news about our special women's group at First Lutheran Church in Jamestown, New York. Several years ago, my husband gave me golf lessons for my birthday. I thought I would start a league with women from church. I put a notice in the bulletin, and 17 women responded!

We called ourselves "Ladies' Links" and found a small local executive golf course where we could play on Tuesday evenings. We always begin with a group prayer and then play our round. After our game, we enjoy more fellowship at a local restaurant and

debrief our game and lives. Over the years we've shared many joys and sorrows and developed close friendships. Several women have invited friends from other churches to join us. A few years ago we realized just how important our weekly summer gatherings were to us. So we now meet year-round; when we're not golfing, we meet every other week at one woman's home for "Dinner and a Movie." The hostess provides the dinner and a selection of movies. We give thanks for the blessings each woman has brought to the group and for these friendships. Oh, just in case you're wondering, I also play golf with my husband—just not on Tuesday evenings!

PJ May, Jamestown, N.Y.

Lutheran Woman Today (ISSN 0896-209X), a magazine for growth in faith and mission, is published 10 times a year by Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in partnership with Augsburg Fortress (Box 1209, Minneapolis, MN 55440). Lutheran Woman Today editorial offices are at 8765 W. Higgins Rd., Chicago, IL 60631-4189. Copyright © 2004 Women of the ELCA. All rights reserved. Duplication in whole or in part in any form is prohibited without written permission from the publisher. Printed in U.S.A. Periodicals postage paid at Minneapolis, Minn., and additional mailing offices. Annual subscriptions: \$11.00; outside North America add \$6 for postage. Single copies, \$2.00. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Lutheran Woman Today, Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, Box 1209, Minneapolis, MN 55440-1209.



GIVE US THIS DAY

God's Comforting Arms

by Marj Leegard

DO YOU EVER FEEL GUILTY BECAUSE YOUR PRAYERS ARE MORE FERVENT WHEN YOU OR SOMEONE NEAR YOU IS SICK? We often begin our prayers when we are sick and end them when we are well again. We almost offer “excuse me” prayers for bothering God at other times. Hymn 765 in *The Moravian Book of Worship* (1995), quoted in *Moravian Daily Texts 2001*, has often offered me comfort:

Come, you weary, heavy laden,
Lost and ruined by the fall:
If you tarry till you're better,
You will never come at all.

When our children and grandchildren were small, one of the most cherished gifts they could receive was a simple can of stick-on bandages. The incredulous “All mine?” and the fun of patching and repatching every bite and scratch and imagined hurt were luxuries. But when something really hurt, it was time to come running to mother. The small bandage might have been adequate, but those comforting, loving arms were needed to complete the treatment.

God welcomes our prayers for our own well-being and our prayers for the comfort of others with the same mother-love. We have all known the blessings of nurses who call us by name and make us comfortable. The doctors who pause quietly beside the bedside as if to say, “I have time to listen and time to explain.” The technicians who apologize for the little sting of taking a blood sample and the

intrusion of instruments. The old friend whose office duties include answering all the questions we are too sick to answer (bless her—she has garnered the information from somewhere and the blanks are all filled). The volunteers who have little bouquets for grandchildren to choose from because they know it feels good for little people to *do* something. The kitchen workers who translate the squiggly lines into odd meals somehow more digestible than the ordinary offerings. All these blessings are counted in our gratitude.

We bring with us the weary, heavy knowledge that we have earned no right to ask for more than has already been given. We have not thanked enough for all the patches we have received. We know that we are in the prayers of our friends. And yet the promise is always there. Even with all of these, “The eternal God is our hiding place: he carries us in his arms” (Deuteronomy 33:27, Contemporary English Version).

The hymn writer had just the words for us. If we tarry until we can come having made ourselves worthy, we will never come at all. The hymn writer declares, “Jesus, Son of God, will save you,” and that is all we need.

God gives us more than we can ask. More even than our friends can ask for us. God carries us in his arms.

LWT columnist Marj Leegard and her husband, Jerome, live in Detroit Lakes, Minn.

FACING **CONFLICT**



FAITHFULLY

by Susan M. Lang

CONFLICT. NOBODY LIKES IT,

even though it is an inevitable thread in the fabric of our lives. You have plans for a family gathering, but out of the blue your employer tells you that you need to attend an out-of-town meeting. Your family is disappointed. The tension on the thread increases. You discover that to get to the meeting you must fly. You'd rather crawl over broken glass than step on a plane. The thread pulls even tighter. Preparing for the sudden trip means that you can't lead a previously scheduled meeting of your women's group at church. You'll let people down, and you hate doing that. The thread is nearly taut.

Conflict causes things to tighten up inside and around us. We feel pulled in opposing directions. One unpleasant situation can affect other areas of our lives. Like the ripples in a pond when a pebble is thrown in, the ripples of a conflict expand outward, forcing us to make tough decisions. But conflict,

like life, happens. Our challenge is to view it through the eyes of faith rather than through the blurred vision of fear. Fear makes us see conflict as something to be avoided at all costs because it might break us, like the thread. Faith challenges us to see it as a colorful new thread to weave into the beautiful tapestry of our life.

GOOD GIRLS DON'T FIGHT

When I was working on my first book, a colleague inquired about my topic. "Are you writing about parenting?" he innocently asked. He was surprised when I told him that my subject was conflict in congregations. His was the first of many such reactions.

"Women are acculturated to get along with everyone; to 'make nice,'" says Janice from Pennsylvania. "Conflict is antithetical to this goal."

Although many people dislike conflict, women in particular often struggle with things we learned in

our upbringing and the notion that "good girls don't fight" or get involved in messy situations. We need to acknowledge this struggle so that we can creatively grow beyond it. Remember, *conflict* is not a dirty word.

WHY IS MY SPIRIT DISQUIETED?

The psalmist writes in Psalm 43, "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?" When we feel pulled in opposing directions, these words burn within us. Internal conflicts occur when our expectations and the realities of life pull in opposite directions.

"Conflict ties me up in knots," says Teresa from Ohio. "I am not good at dealing with conflict of any type. I think the origins lie in my childhood, where there was much conflict in my life."

"I have two feelings about conflict," says Lisa from Pennsylvania. "One, that conflict is inevitable, and two, that though I

prefer to avoid it at all costs, I'm willing to engage in it if it is for something I truly believe in and feel strongly about."

Internal conflict pulls tighter and tighter when our past behavior is suddenly challenged and we are asked, or prodded, to move beyond our comfort zone. Without such a challenge to our present comfort levels, we would stagnate. There would be no growth. Each new step involves risk. Each risk is another step of faith.

"Currently, I am having a major internal conflict about losing weight," says Heather of Minnesota. "After years of struggling, I have joined a weight-loss program. But success with that program means I have to change years of eating in a certain way and thinking in a certain way. Change is hard. It's much easier to stay the way you are."

Paul writes in Romans 12:2, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect."

CREATING THE CHANGE YOU SEEK

Discovering and reweaving the threads of the inner struggles of life to create a new tapestry is possible. Begin by examining the expecta-

tions that you have of yourself. What are they? Where do you feel that they are currently being challenged? What is the source of the challenge? Why are you conflicted over taking the next step? What steps are you willing to make? How will those steps change your self-perception?

Recognize that the expectations you have of yourself will change over time. Dealing with change often elicits the feeling of that thread tightening in us. We may fight it. Some women were raised with the role expectation of the stay-at-home mom who, like TV's fictional Donna Reed, daily donned her string of pearls and apron. Although she and her cohorts can still be seen on classic television reruns, time has not stood still over the past 50 years. We now see women in the pulpit, in outer space, and in almost every vocation and role, including those of homemaker and mother. How have your own roles at home, in society, and in the church changed over the years? What assets have you developed that will empower you to move in a new direction as you weave your tapestry of life?

Be aware, too, that the pace of life in the twenty-first century can create its own tensions. Lifestyles today tend to be more fast-paced than in the 1950s. Being on the

run all day every day means that we need to make decisions about what is, and is not, important in our schedules and in our lives. List the things that you value most in the personal, physical, social, spiritual, and vocational areas of your life. What roadblocks to your life goals currently prevent you from enjoying the things you value? How do you cope with the tensions of living?

"My primary coping mechanism in a conflict—internal or external—is to remind myself that God is in control," says Lisa. "When I can focus on that, the grip that the conflict has on me usually lessens significantly."

DEALING WITH EXTERNAL CONFLICTS

Unless we live on a desert island, most of the conflicts we face will involve other people. Where two or three are gathered, there will be a variety of perceptions and opinions on roles, expectations, and values. We're not cookie-cutter Christians, yet we often expect others to be just like us.

An "in your face" mom may cause problems at day care or in a scout troop. We may observe inappropriate, and perhaps unethical, behavior in the workplace. Congregational life may heat up, with members taking different sides on

an issue. Conflicts involving others can catch us unaware and cause uneasiness—even disease—in and around us.

At one time, conflict with others “affected all areas of my life,” says Janice. “It affected my sleep, my stress levels were very high, and I got sick. It was a very unpleasant experience for me.”

A sister’s extended visit caused problems for Renee of Tennessee. “It affected the relationship between me and my husband because he felt that I should be the one to confront her and tell her to go, and I’ve never been good at confrontations. In fact, I loathe them.”

External conflict can put us in more of a bind than internal conflict, because we lack control of one end of the thread. We don’t know what the other person will do or say, or even when such events might occur. If we are already worn down and vulnerable in other areas, we may feel cornered when an external conflict arises. But there are ways to handle struggles involving other people.

SEEING “I TO I”

The basis of Christian life is Matthew 18, which instructs us to take up a concern directly with the other party involved. When we carry on a gossip session with a

third party, everyone gets tied up in knots, and the thread becomes unusable. Instead, speak directly with the person out of Christian love and mutual respect.

When speaking with brothers and sisters, we need to clearly define ourselves and our beliefs. Toss out the “you shoulds,” and instead state what you believe and your position on the issue at hand. Set clear boundaries, but be open to the work of the Holy Spirit in the relationship. Consider how you have handled past conflicts and what you have learned from them. How have you grown as a result? Build your communication on confidence, not on fear.

Don’t just talk; listen, too. Encourage the other person to define her beliefs and concerns. Using “I” language will eventually help you both see “I to I.” Let others define themselves. You may learn a lot about the past struggles and threads that another person has woven into his or her life story.

Conflict in relationships can teach a great deal. “I learned to be more aware of the other person’s sensitivities and to get assumptions on the table, which makes communication easier,” says Janice. “I learned that I could be strong in a conflict and not relinquish my integrity, despite the pressure to do so.”

External conflicts can even add an exciting new thread to your tapestry. You have shared a journey with another person, and her story and your story are now entwined.

“I learned that there are ways to confront others without pushing them into the defensive,” says Renee, after she confronted her sister. “I think I learned a lot more about patience and love through the whole experience.”

Use the three “P’s” to weave a rich and colorful life: Pray. Prioritize. Push ahead. Seek the empowering strength and guidance of the Holy Spirit as you face your struggles. Take the time to identify and focus on your most important roles and values; you will then be able to define more clearly who you are. Take positive steps into the future; doing so will lessen the internal tug-of-war. Press on to the goal of a new life in Christ (Philippians 3:13–14) as you face conflict faithfully.

Susan M. Lang, also known as RevWriter, is a pastor and an author. You can find information on her ministry and writing at her Web site: www.revwriter.com.

NOTE: Some material in this article was taken from *Our Community: Dealing with Conflict in Our Congregation* (Congregational Leader Series) by Susan M. Lang (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002).



Celebrating the Village

by Anne Basye

WHEN I WAS A TEEN, MY MOTHER OFTEN SAID, WITH TEARS OF FRUSTRATION, "I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH YOU, BECAUSE WHEN I WAS YOUR AGE, I DIDN'T HAVE A MOTHER."

Her words stung. What I heard was this: I don't know what to do, and I don't care enough to figure it out.

Today I know that's not what she meant. Of course the absence of her own mother hurt, but that

remember the people who shoulder our burden and share our joy.

Nick, the son of my good friend Jennifer, was born with Fukuyama Disease, a rare syndrome marked by deafness, muscular dystrophy, frozen facial muscles, frequent seizures, and a mental handicap. No one could possibly be prepared for all that comes along with a baby who has this disorder, even confident, experienced parents like Jennifer and her hus-



never stopped her from figuring out how to mother me. Into the empty space in her heart stepped aunts and friends, teachers and neighbors, cousins and doctors. Every one of them has supported and shaped her mothering.

No one is ever completely equipped to be a parent. Fortunately, God has placed us in a community that can help us figure it out. "It takes a village to raise a child" may be a cliché, but it's true. So this month, as we celebrate mothers, let's take a moment to

band. Some friends shied away, frightened of a child who might have a terrifying seizure at any minute. But others—brave friends, family members, and caregivers who were unafraid of Nick's great needs—stepped in and helped Jennifer and Bob find their footing.

"Having someone who is not afraid of your life, who understands how hard it is but accepts it, is very good," she told me. "As the years wear on and the visits to the hospital increase, you need affirmation from people you respect and admire."

The teachers, aides, doctors, and grandparents who helped parent Nick also reassured Jennifer and Bob and boosted their confidence. Together, they loved Nick, affirmed him, and somehow—telepathically, or through the grace of God—read him, even though he couldn't speak, had no facial expressions, and communicated only through a few signs and gestures. His last school aide was so deeply connected to Nick that Jennifer thought of her as his other mother. "She made a world of difference," Jennifer says.

During Nick's 12 years of life, he was surrounded by people who reveled in what Nick was and how he saw the world. That's something we hope all our children will receive, and it's a gift that my friend Janet in Brooklyn delivers in spades to the younger members of her community gardening group. As she teaches them how to plant, water, and compost, they bring her their concerns and secrets. She is the adult they can open up to while their parents labor in another corner of the garden.

A woman with no children of her own, Janet is surprised and delighted by these relationships. "It's a nice change from the 'you don't have kids, you don't know anything about them, and my kids don't need to listen to you' attitude I sometimes get," she tells me.

All of us remember people like Janet—grownups who loved and appreciated us and wanted to know us, even in our worst moments. For me, it was my pastor and his wife, who took me and my teenage opinions seriously. Because they thought I was mature, I began to see myself that way, too.

My son, Alex, is taking the same steps toward others. His Shakespeare teacher is a big fan of his writing and never fails to let him know it. Our upstairs neighbor gets him talking even when his mouth seems sealed with cement! Like the people who could see the real Nick inside his burdens and symptoms, these grownups can engage the real Alex hidden behind

sloppy posture and monosyllabic answers. As they mother him with their attention, they are helping him figure out who he is and who he might become.

We ache to be known and are gladdened when we are. Psalm 139, my favorite, celebrates God's deep knowing of us.

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.

God's loving knowledge of us permeates our selves and our souls. Though we cannot hope to know one another so profoundly, all of us are called to parent, to love. By mothering and fathering, we can help each other figure out how to love and care for the community around us.

Nick has been dead for eight years, but Jennifer remains grateful for the network of people who were so devoted to Nick that they walked with him, unafraid, to the end. Janet is grateful for the children who call forth her mothering spirit. I am grateful for everyone who pitched in to raise me, and for everyone helping my son discover, layer by layer, who he will be.

On Mother's Day, I'll accept any appreciation that my son begrudges me. I'll call my mother and thank her for persisting even when she wasn't sure what to do next. And I'll name all the women and men who helped her mother me.

I hope you'll do the same. Take the time to remember who has mothered you, and how generously they did it. And don't forget your own mothering! Whether you mother your own children or someone else's, your presence matters. Someone surely is grateful.

Anne Basye is a writer in Chicago.



In October 2003, Lutheran deaconesses from all over the world, led by Deaconess Louise Williams, met at the retreat center of Bayad, south of Cairo, Egypt. Built between the Nile and the desert, Bayad is one of the many projects of the Sisters of St. Mary that aim at showing God's love by lifting people up through spiritual, educational, and economic encouragement. Bayad is a women-made miracle—a place once barren now blooming with fruit trees, gardens, and a retreat house. Bayad testifies to the miracles that can happen when women dare to dream of showing God's love in the world.

Dreams of Love

by Nelly van Doorn-Harder

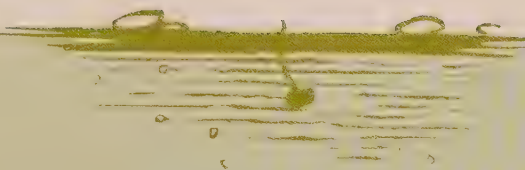
It is a May weekend in Cairo, Egypt, in 2003.

Families are out shopping or strolling around. Traffic is heavy. I am on the verge of deciding to walk back to the retreat center's guesthouse when a shiny new taxi stops and its driver beckons me to get in. After telling him where I need to go, I ask him, "How are you doing?"

"I am very fine, praise the Lord," the driver answers. "I thank God every day for letting me live." It is only then that I notice he has no legs and operates the gas pedal with his hand. In response to my questioning look, he volunteers: "Several years ago, while I was walking on the street, a car ran straight into me and cut off both of my legs." I nod, and he answers my next unasked question—about his car. It is designed specifically for a handicapped driver—the first such car I have seen here in dusty, chaotic Cairo. I have yet to see a wheelchair-

accessible entrance or even a proper wheelchair, let alone such a car. In Egypt, people without legs usually earn their bread by begging. "Egypt is improving," the driver says. "A government committee now exists to help raise awareness for the plight of the handicapped. Its members suggested that the government help us with tools to earn a living. I chose to become a taxi driver."

As we move slowly through Cairo, the driver proudly tells me that two of his children are already in college, and the youngest is in high school. Their lot would be far different without the steady, solid income from the taxi. At the guesthouse, I make a mental note to ask Sister Rauth about this project. She works with mentally and physically handicapped people and may know the rest of the story.



THE SEED OF A DREAM

Sister Rauth belongs to the Sisters of St. Mary, a Coptic Orthodox community. The Copts of Egypt constitute the largest Christian community in the Middle East, but they number less than 7 million of the more than 60 million Egyptians.

Rauth has been with the sisters since the 1970s, following in the footsteps of her Aunt Hannah. Hannah and Sister Agapie had dreamed of founding this community and eventually did so with the help of their bishop, Athanasius. Their dream was born at a time when the roles of both Coptic and Muslim women were limited to those of wife and mother. Some nuns lived in the dilapidated convents, but most had chosen that way of life as a refuge from extreme poverty or because of a handicap that made them unmarriageable.

Not questioning traditional roles, Hannah and Agapie were

touched by a revival that had kindled in their church near the beginning of the twentieth century. Coptic children were learning in Sunday schools about their rich heritage, liturgy, and saints. As enthusiasm for the schools increased, the curriculum eventually reached the universities. This newfound knowledge helped cement a solid Coptic identity and awakened young people's desire to serve their church.

The 1950s were a time of national transition. Economic and political development was the watchword of the new Nasser government, and the Coptic Church was able to provide economic and spiritual aid to its poorest members.

Men became deacons and Sunday school teachers or flocked to the monasteries to become monks and possibly bishops (the Coptic Church elects its bishops from the monastic communities).

Women also became Sunday school teachers; some entered social work, but most gave that up at marriage. In these years Hannah, who had a few years of secondary education, worked in the oasis of Fayoum, south of Cairo. She set up social and economic development projects for girls who were on the verge of entering marriage illiterate and without any marketable skills. Hannah taught them to read, write, and embroider. During the day the girls worked on their parents' farms, so the teaching took place at night by the light of the gas lamps in the town square. Here Hannah first saw how minor improvements in a woman's education could raise her economic status tenfold.

Hannah wanted to continue this work on a larger scale, but her family decided that she should marry. With her husband she moved to Beni Suef, where she met Agapie, who was studying to



become a teacher. Agapie hoped to become a nun; she was lucky that her father did not force her to accept one of her many suitors. She and Hannah wanted to devote themselves to a life of service in the church in the same way that Coptic men could. They decided to leave their heart's desire to the Lord; each would devote herself to prayer and service. Hannah had a simple motto: "There is a time for everything." In the meantime Hannah's family kept wondering when the first grandchild would arrive.

THE NOURISHING OF THE SEED

By now it was 1962, and Athanasius had just been ordained bishop of Beni Suef. He had been a Sunday school and high school teacher, and before joining the monastery he had raised his widowed sister's two children. Athanasius, a social activist, saw in his neighbors limitless capacities to serve the Lord and their fellow

human beings. He saw this potential in men and women, in Christians and Muslims.

Hannah and Agapie felt it would be safe to share their vision with Athanasius. He suggested dedicating special prayers to the cause until God opened a way. One winter morning in 1965, Athanasius told them that the answer was near. That same week Hannah's husband died in the prime of life. In his will, he asked that their apartment be used to serve the church. After the funeral Agapie moved in with Hannah, and the Sisters of St. Mary were born.

The sisters did not then focus on a specific call but devoted themselves to "the poorest of the poor," to those "who are not considered human." They wanted to translate the Incarnation into action and show that God loves all humanity. As Jesus had lifted up the spirits of those who met him, so the sisters

wanted to convert desperation into hope. The bishop taught them that "Jesus did not stay up in the sky but came down to join us on earth; his actions were utterly practical." The sisters' first project was a day care center for the many mothers who could not earn extra income for their large families because they had no safe place to bring their children while they worked.

From her childhood Hannah remembered seeing many handicapped children and adults, many the offspring of marriage between blood relatives. She knew that their shamed families often hid them in closets or chained them to the bed. These handicapped people belonged to the group the sisters wanted to serve. They considered them like the wounds in Christ's body when he was on the cross. These wounds belonged to the body and were even more precious because Christ had suffered them in order



to gain our salvation. Hannah saw that immediate attention was needed to dress these wounds. By this time, she was the superior of the community and her responsibilities limited her ability to travel, so she asked her niece Rauth to join the community and specialize in this work. Rauth went from house to house in the villages, seeking out the hidden handicapped. She took them back with her to the convent and founded a vocational training school to serve them.

THE SEED BEARS FRUIT

Rauth has turned shame into pride. Today, each year, parents travel from the villages to admire their children's handcrafts, see them perform in plays, and hear them read stories. The patriarch of the Coptic Church, Shenouda III, asked Rauth to develop a churchwide program modeled on what she developed in Beni Suef,

so Rauth has moved to Cairo. In her work plan, she refers to the centers for the handicapped now set up in local churches as "places of dreams."

Hannah and Bishop Athanasius have returned to their heavenly homes. After Hannah's death it was revealed that she and her husband, moved by their dedication to the poor, had taken a private vow of celibacy in marriage, an ancient practice. They knew all along that they would have no children of their own; they chose to give their love to hundreds of children instead. The work of the Sisters of St. Mary and the bishop has spread all over Egypt. Agapie is still active in teaching the novices. More than a hundred women are vowed members of the sisterhood. The Egyptian government has adopted several of the sisters' developmental projects. In 2000, a few months before his death,

Bishop Athanasius received a national award for his development work, which has also won high praise as a bridge between Muslims and Christians.

That taxi in Cairo, it turns out, was a brainchild of Sister Rauth. She became a member of the national government's High Committee for the Rehabilitation of the Handicapped. Practical as ever, she taught the other members of the committee that love has to be translated into action, even in the shape of a bright yellow taxi.

Nelly van Doorn-Harder is associate professor of theology at Valparaiso University in Valparaiso, Indiana. While working in Egypt as the director of a refugee ministry, she became interested in the Coptic Orthodox Church and wrote the book *Contemporary Coptic Nuns* (1995).



ASCENSION

WHEN ABSENCE IS PRESENCE

by Kathryn Vitalis Hoffman

TEXTS: ACTS 1:1-11; LUKE 24:5-53

GRACE AND PEACE BE TO YOU FROM THE ONE WHO IS,
THE ONE WHO WAS, AND THE ONE WHO IS TO COME.

I hate good-byes. I suppose it's because they mean there's an end to something. Of course, they can mark the big transitions in anyone's life. But there is a loneliness, a sense of wistfulness for what was that settles into the moment . . . as one disappears. And good-byes also reflect the truth that what is now will not last forever.

Do you know what I mean? How about sending your child off to school for the first time . . . or to

camp . . . or to college? I know that I dread these good-byes, and so I prolong them. Just ask my husband. At the door, I'll bring up new topics to discuss. I'll add ums and ohs to make the moments last just a little longer. Goodness, when we recently moved, I had a hard time saying good-bye to the baby clothes and toys. Of course, my daughters had outgrown them years ago, but it was hard to say good-bye to those years and that stage.



According to the 2003 figures, 2,839 ELCA pastors are women (16 percent of all 17,733 ordained ministers). Within the category of active pastors (those not retired), women account for 22.7 percent. In an effort to celebrate and lift up women who have answered the call to serve as pastors, we are bringing some of their favorite sermons to you in the pages of *LWT*.

My mom is the master of the long good-bye. Back where we're from it's even got a name—the Minnesota good-bye. It begins in the house when we say, "Well, it's about time to go." That's when she offers more dessert. When we start moving to the door, she finds something to show us. While we're gathering our things together, she's offering us food to take home. At the door, hugs and kisses are given all around. My girls give her pictures they've drawn or flowers they've picked. And as we walk to the car, my mom walks along and thinks of new things to ask. Do you know anyone like this?

Now I'm afraid you're catching on to this story because you know that I'm enabling the situation. Can you see my husband standing by the car door? He gets the girls in but not before they give more hugs and more kisses. Now you'd think that once we're in and moving, we would be done saying good-bye. No, my mom walks along beside the car and blows kisses and waves to each of us.

It's finally over when our car rounds the corner. We tap the horn and through the rearview mirror I see my mom standing in the driveway, her hand in the air, her eyes still straining to see us, her other hand holding the already wilting flowers close to her heart, the pictures tucked under her arm.

Can you picture that with me? Because it's this image that comes to mind when I hear this story of Jesus' ascension. It goes like this:

*While he was blessing them,
he withdrew from them. (Luke 24:51)*

*As they were watching, he was lifted up,
and a cloud took him out of their sight. (Acts 1:9)*

And so the disciples watch him go, necks bent back, eyes straining toward the sky, hands waving, the

words of Jesus held close to their hearts. Left behind. There is a series of books and even movies about how you can avoid being left behind, and yet here we are, gathered together on this holy day not only to acknowledge but even to celebrate that we, the followers of Christ, are left behind. I doubt it will sell.

In fact, I'm beginning to realize why, in other years, I've zipped from Easter to Pentecost without a thought of Ascension. It's because to celebrate Ascension, we must acknowledge absence. Jesus—the way we want to keep him, the crucified body that could settle many an uncertainty—is gone, out of sight, and no matter how we prolong the moment, there *is* a good-bye in the life of faith.

And so here we are, our eyes straining to see something out yonder, our hands grasping for what was, our wilted hopes held close to our hearts. Ascension involves gaining a sense of God's absence while searching for God's presence.

Did the disciples linger at the place where they lost sight of Jesus? They must have been there awhile, at least according to Acts, because the men in white robes asked, "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" Implied in this question, no doubt, is part of the answer. If you want to see Jesus again, do not look up toward heaven.

I'm still thinking of my mother held in place where she last saw us disappear around the corner. I can imagine my dad coming out and saying, "Why don't you come in, dear?" No doubt she returned to the house, put the flowers in a vase, hung the pictures on the refrigerator, and cherished a heightened sense of remembering. Did she go look at the photo albums again? At some point she had to make supper. And eventually she discovered new ways in which we were present. We were present in letters and e-mail messages and phone calls and on-line photos, even as she joyously anticipated our next visit.

But here's where the analogy breaks down. We cannot compare e-mail and phone messages to Jesus' presence for us now, after his ascension. Perhaps, though, we are reminded that when Jesus' crucified body withdraws into its rightful place of glory, we're on the brink of a new presence.

As Barbara Brown Taylor, a preacher herself, puts it:

If they wanted to see Jesus again, it was no use looking up. Better they should look around instead, at each other, at the world, at the ordinary people in their ordinary lives, because that was where they were most likely to find him . . . not the way they used to know him, but the new way, not in his own body but in their bodies, the risen, the ascended Lord who was no longer anywhere on earth so that he could be everywhere instead.¹

I began this sermon by comparing the Ascension to the picture of a mother standing with an empty hand held up in the driveway, watching her loved ones go. Perhaps this ascension event is less about saying good-bye and more about going on . . . into the house, or on to Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth, bearing witness to the living Lord not just anywhere but everywhere, not for one time but for all time—and not just then but now. The crucified one is not only the risen one but also the ascended one, who is also the ever-present one.

So the disciples quit looking up and instead looked around and at each other and ahead, and the acts of the apostles began.

You know it would be tempting to jump from Easter to Pentecost—and in fact sometimes we do. We marvel at the dramatic change in the disciples. We can hardly recognize Peter, who once cowered at the foot

of the cross in denial but soon preached boldly of Jesus, the risen Lord. We talk of Peter and the others as the spirit-filled ones. But let us not forget that before they were filled with the spirit and gathered into the church, they were emptied of Jesus and left behind as he disappeared in a cloud.

Could not this be good news for us who experience absence as a sharp longing within our being? On this Ascension Day, we are in transition between what was and what will be. And for now we name our losses, we acknowledge the absence, and we articulate what was once present.

And then, in the days to come, our empty hands will be filled, our eyes will see the coming of our Lord, and the wilted regrets will bloom into hope. We see this hope bloom as it is planted in the real-life needs of those in our midst. We discover this new way of knowing Jesus as our extended hands reach out to share what we have received. And we no longer look up, but instead our eyes strain to see those who live in the margins, and we begin to see Christ at work in their midst.

On this Ascension Day, we no longer look back, and we do not look up. For now we look around and behold, Jesus is here, his body and blood, the Word made flesh.

We are not saying good-bye, but we are welcomed to the table, set for the ones left behind. To God be the glory. Amen.

Rev. Kathryn Vitalis Hoffman is adjunct instructor of preaching at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, Pa., and recently served as interim pastor at St. James Lutheran Church, Gettysburg. This sermon was preached at a community worship service in Gettysburg on Ascension Day, 2003.

Note

1. Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 1995), 77.

HOW DOES YOUR WOMEN'S GROUP SHOW GOD'S LOVE TO PEOPLE WHO ARE NOT PART OF A CONGREGATION?

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Decorah, Iowa, has regularly held an international craft fair the first Sunday of November and offered items from SERRV International and Ten Thousand Villages, two organizations that market fairly traded handcrafts. We give our members and the community a chance to participate and help on a global scale. We also have a soup luncheon, and many people in the community look forward to this annual visit to Good Shepherd Church.

Cynthia Jacobs—Decorah, Iowa

Families Moving Forward is a multichurch, rotating homeless shelter involving several churches in our community. Guests are served dinner and provided with overnight accommodations and breakfast for a week. A separate day shelter also provides social services that help those in need to find permanent housing.

Christine Scanlon—Bloomington, Minn.

Christ the King Lutheran Church

Last July we had a picnic and invited our ladies 80 years old and older to be our honored guests. We reminisced about their years in the Ladies' Aid and presented each of them with a flower. We also hold monthly Bible study at an assisted living villa so women of all faiths can join us. The Bigfork community is largely made up of retired citizens. We make certain all our elderly know they are much appreciated.

Laura Rajala—Bigfork, Minn.

Bigfork Lutheran Church

A major emphasis of our women's organization is to provide help to those in need. We consistently inform the congregation (through weekly announcements, by way of the monthly church newsletter, and in our Bible study meetings) that we are collecting clothing and food, primarily for those in need locally, but also for the Navajo Mission and School in Rock Point, Arizona, and for Lutheran World Relief. Almost every Sunday someone brings items that we pass along.

Lillian Simons—Los Angeles, Calif.

First Lutheran Church, Glendale

Our church participates in the Mitten Tree Project along with other area churches—Methodist, Christian Reformed—as well as members from the community. Through this program we organize Christmas gifts and boxes of food to send to local people in need. We include words of encouragement and information about our churches, as well as devotional material. We are hoping that in Raymond, Minnesota, we are making a difference.

Pat Olson—Raymond, Minn.

St. John's Lutheran Church

Our church encourages people to donate a Lutheran World Relief sewing kit on Mother's Day in honor of their mother and to help other mothers learn skills to help clothe and support their children.

Diane Palmer—North Bend, Ore.

Faith Lutheran Church

An Undelivered Eulogy

by K. S. Hardy



You have asked me for words,
Words to describe your life,
Words to recount the history
Of your numerous joys,
Your courage and your strength,
Your triumphs and your sorrows.

But the words will not come.
They are beneath the sadness
Of the knowledge that you
Will no longer touch our days,
And I hold the words inside me
As treasure, afraid that to share
Will diminish the glow of memory.

K. S. Hardy, a writer and a poet, has a degree in English from Defiance College, Defiance, Ohio.



Women Investing in Mission

Lutheran women—and the congregational and synodical organizations they have founded—are helping to build the church by investing in the **MISSION INVESTMENT FUND OF THE ELCA**. To learn how you and your women's organization can participate or for current interest rates, call the Fund today at **(800) 638-3522, ext. 2943**.

MISSION
INVESTMENT FUND
OF THE ELCA

8765 W. HIGGINS ROAD
CHICAGO, IL 60631
(800) 638-3522, EXT. 2943

E-MAIL: MIF@ELCA.ORG
WWW.ELCA.ORG/OT/MIF

Mission Investments are subject to certain risks. See "Risk Factors" following the introduction in the Offering Circular. As securities issued by a non-profit religious institution, the investments are not insured by FDIC, SIPC or any federal or state regulatory agency. The securities are sold only by means of the Offering Circular, which can be obtained from the Mission Investment Fund.

this month's **QUESTION**

Go to www.elca.org/wo/lwt to enter your response.
(Results will appear in the October 2004 issue.)

Q: I earnestly seek ways to act boldly on my faith in Jesus Christ.

- A. True
- B. False

Results from Question of the Month (January/February 2004)

Q: When it comes to sharing my faith,

Here's what you said:

- 24.5% I usually do so with people who belong to my own faith community.
- 39.6% I choose to show my Christian beliefs in my actions
- 13.2% I struggle to find the right way and often avoid discussing my faith.
- 22.6% I am comfortable discussing my faith with whoever I meet.

bold gentleness

by Joan D. Chittister



(no, I really shouldn't)



Scripture study is a dangerous thing. It confronts us with opposites that we would so often rather ignore. This month's readings from chapter 4 of Paul's letter to the Philippians, for instance, can be especially perilous for women.

Like Tevye's fiddler on the roof, Scripture perches us between the poles of life and expects us to balance there. The problem is that far too often we feel swept away by one side or the other. And, far too often, we would really rather choose one extreme over the other. Far too often, neither extreme meets even the most basic of Christian standards, "Love your enemies."

Who doesn't know people for whom misery and woe have become a way of life? They don't strike out in anger, of course. They never start a revolution. They never get tempestuous or violent or mean. They just, well, suffer.

They are gentle people. Or are they?

Is such gentleness a kind of passive aggression, which in an attempt to be virtuous refuses to be honest, all the while making sure that the pain is visible to everyone? Or is gentleness the attempt to confront the intolerable without seeming to confront it at all?

In a culture of domination like ours, it may be more important than ever before to make the distinction, both in our personal lives and in our public postures. We live between two extremes now: the capacity for massive force and the fear of total powerlessness. Last year, in one state of our country, we sent a boy with severely limited mental capacity to the death chamber for the murder of another. In another state, we refused to withdraw the feeding tube of a woman who had been comatose for 14 years. In both cases we argued that life has ultimate value. In one case, however, we ended a life in mid-flight with impunity in order to pay with it for the death of another, regardless of the reduced level of culpability that a limited mental capacity implies. In the other, we maintained it at all cost, regardless of the vegetative level to which it had shrunk. By any measure, the United States, compared to other countries in the West, ranks as one of the most violent countries in the world.

But it is also, by the same measure, a very gentle one. We have, simultaneously, the world's most destructive military and the world's greatest number of child welfare laws. We put more money per capita into destruction than any other nation on earth, and we also put more money per capita into human development. How does a Christian resolve the two extremes? Which shall we be: just or merciful, vengeful or passive, tough or kind? What kind of guidance does Scripture give us about such things? History cautions us not to answer too quickly. Our

past record, like our present responses, is mottled. The Crusaders who went to reclaim the Christian shrines in the Holy Land meant well, surely. But the twelfth-century assassination of 70,000 Arabs in that endeavor rivals bloodbaths anywhere in history for pure animal ferocity and human brutality. Arabs hold that memory in their hearts to this very day—and fear it. It has become a factor in modern politics. It clouds the very air we breathe. No doubt about it: We have a most profound stake in the virtue of gentleness, not simply for ourselves but also for our children. Few centuries, in fact, have faced the question of the tension between strength and gentleness more often and failed in its answer more than our own.

The Germans who meekly turned gas jets on Jews in Auschwitz because they saw obedience to legitimate authority as a Christian virtue were as reprobate in their compliance as the Crusaders were in their zeal. To this day, women around the world stay in marriages with brutal men because submission is thought to be “a woman’s role.” Churchmen tell women ignored by centuries of male-defined prayers that “when they say ‘men’ they mean also ‘women.’” Invisibility and compliance, women learn, are “God’s will” for them. Gentleness, the computer dictionary on this modern machine says, is “befitting or characteristic of a maiden.” Women who speak up are still chastised for their lack of femininity.

To warring factions in Philippi—two women, most exegetes assume—the apostle Paul writes a letter warning them to be “gentle.” “I want you to be happy, always happy,” he says to them. “Let your gentleness be known to everyone,” he insists. “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,” he directs. But which mind? Has Paul, who remembers the Jesus who forgave the woman taken in adultery, forgotten the Jesus who overturned the tables of money changers in the temple or the Jesus

who called the Pharisees “ye brood of vipers and hypocrites”? Clearly, Jesus was not made of marsh-mallow. Nor, it seems, does he expect us to be passive in the face of injustice.

So what is the answer? Does being Christian mean being nonresistant, or does being Christian mean being aggressively insistent? Is it more Christian to be compliant or to be clear in our principles and unrelenting in our positions? And if we are to be clear and unrelenting, in what ways?

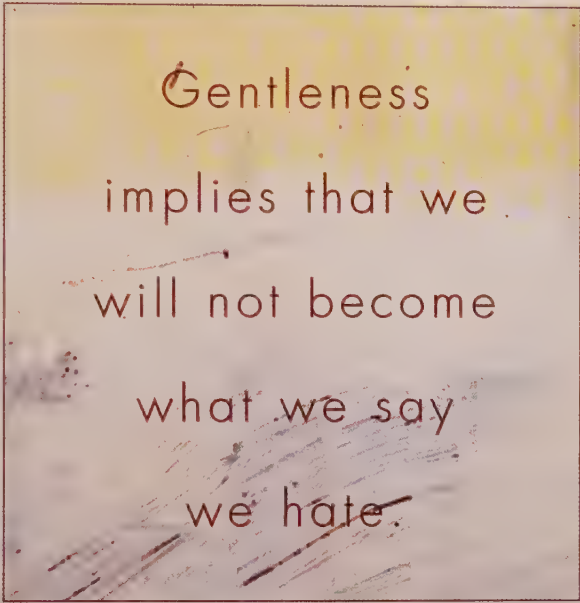
“Those preach patience who have never known pain,” wrote Henry Bohn, a nineteenth-century British publisher. And the position makes sense. There is one kind of gentleness that talks people into putting up with injustice for the sake of their immortal souls. To “offer it up” becomes a way of life rooted in the call to live a warped and specious kind of virtue. It calls for slaves to love slavery here so that they can be free in eternity. But the truth is that slavery cannot ever be justified, let alone loved.

No, gentleness is not about forbearance. Mere forbearance can be masochism, a kind of neurotic delight in suffering. Gentleness is about the ability to bring truth, without at the same time bringing destruction. Or, as Aristotle put it, “Virtue is the golden mean between two vices, the one of excess and the other of deficiency.” The problem is that we have defined the truth right out of gentleness. We have made gentleness into weakness, deference, passivity, and tender unconcern. Worse, we have made

this kind of gentleness a woman’s virtue. Men can be strong. Women must be gentle. Read “nice.” Read “weak and compliant and accepting.”

Women have been told “not to bother their little heads” about the big things of life. Harriet Beecher Stowe was not to bother her head with slavery. Florence Nightingale was not to bother her head with care of the wounded. Dorothy Day was not to both-

er her head with the plight of the poor or the process of peace. And when women do bother with such things, people respond by being either amazed or scandalized. It’s a pretty mess to be in, this emptiness in the name of gentleness. When a person is in the full bloom of both physical and spiritual adulthood, being told that virtue demands being empty and immature for the sake of being gentle fails to inspire.



Surely the Word of God deserves more from us than that. Gentleness is what makes Jesus who he is: Jesus. He who could have started a revolution, begun a revolt in the temple, brought down lightning on the crowds, or turned the rabble into a messianic army chose instead to speak his truth day after day after day and die for the telling of it, rather than hurt a single soul himself.

Jesus did not defer in the name of being “meek and tender of heart.” He did not accept. He did not stay silent in the face of injustice to lepers or women or foreigners or the sick, whatever the laws of the time. A rabble-rouser they called him, though never once did he incite the crowds to revolt. He simply taught a tenacious truth armed with tenacious

patience. He simply never ceased to say what he believed or to do what had to be done.

In him we see the real meaning of gentleness. Gentleness is honesty plied without violence and without ceasing. To be gentle is to unmask the inequities around us without destroying those who prefer to maintain the masks.

Gentleness implies that we will do no name-calling.

Gentleness implies that we will not ridicule.

Gentleness implies that we will do no harm in our zeal for good.

Gentleness implies that we will not become what we say we hate.

I saw a living model of gentleness three weeks ago that burned itself into my brain in ways that make me even more certain of the grandeur of gentleness. The group assembled in Jerusalem for a meeting of the World Council of Religious Leaders had about it the iconic air of sages and prophets. There were three swamis, two Buddhist monks, one rabbi, one Protestant minister, and three nuns—a Buddhist, a Hindu, and a Catholic. The council members represented over 5,000 years of holy books and spiritual texts and ascetic practices and meditation. But this meeting was not about various meditation practices. This meeting was about the fruit of all that meditation.

The recently formed World Council of Religious Leaders had come to Israel and the Palestinian Territories to see, as wise and loving outsiders, what it was that religion itself could do to unravel the Gordian knot that blocks the coming of peace in the Middle East.

At first blush, the conversation might have seemed to an observer to be, at best, a series of pious platitudes to be tolerated but never taken seriously. After all, what kind of politics is politics based on spiritual values?

Then an older, seasoned dharma master from Taiwan, who has lived in political tension all his life, rose to speak. He folded his hands across his chest and said, slowly and gently, to all the warring parties present: “When two people coming from two different directions try to cross a raging river on the same log in the same place at the same time, the two of them will meet in the middle, and neither can pass.” I thought to myself, “Well, that’s exactly what we have in this situation, in fact in most situations. This is the mother of all standoffs.” But then the master went on. “Unless one of them backs up,” he paused and smiled, “neither can proceed.”

Clearly, gentleness is about figuring out how to get both people across the same river. Gentleness is not about either giving up or giving in. It is about the unyielding but gracious pursuit of truth. It is about Jesus, the one who will not strike back. The one who will not quit being exactly who he is meant to be. Right to the end.

Or as Paul puts it in Philippians 2, “Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, . . . [and] shine like stars in the world [because you are] holding fast to the word of life. . . .”

Sister Joan D. Chittister has been a leading voice in contemporary spirituality and church and world issues for over 25 years. Her most recent book, *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope* (Eerdmans, 2003), was named Best General Interest Book for 2003 by the Association of Theological Booksellers. She is presently serving as co-chair of the Global Peace Initiative of Women Religious and Spiritual Leaders. A regular columnist for the *National Catholic Reporter*, Chittister is the executive director of Benetvision, a resource and research center for contemporary spirituality in Erie, Pa.

TELL US ABOUT A FRIENDSHIP THAT HAS STOOD THE TEST OF TIME.
WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED FROM THAT FRIENDSHIP?

Judy and I have been friends all our lives. She recently gave me a snapshot of us in her sandbox: she was two, and I was three. We shared parents, homes, and backyards until her family moved across town when she was 11. We still saw each other at church and in high school, but we were in different classes. We attended each other's weddings and kept in touch after we moved away.

In 1965 we were raising our children at home, attending church together. I taught her kids in Sunday school. In the past 10 years, our lives have come close again. We've been in the same circle at church, been Stephen Ministers together, and renewed our special friendship. What a blessing!

We've found that friendship is not a fragile thing, especially if God is part of it. It's a strong bond that grows stronger. We look forward to another 25 years at least!

Gloria Current—Conover, Ohio

I met Conni 44 years ago when our husbands began seminary. We joined the same small church and sang in the choir. Then our husbands were given internship assignments only 40 miles apart in Oil City and Butler, Pennsylvania. During our husbands' senior year, we both gave birth to daughters—a day apart. We shared potlucks, game nights, talks, and laughs.

After seminary, we went different ways. Her husband received a call to Georgia, mine to Texas. We had a few reunions, but not many. Now that we are retired, we make the trip between their Florida home and our

Washington home more often.

From this friendship, I have learned that God is wonderfully merciful in sending people into our lives who stay connected; who begin where we left off the last time we were together, who do not let miles deter understanding. We have shared the trials and joys of raising children and leaving a place we loved to see where God was leading next. We have shared physical and emotional ups and downs. I've learned from Conni about the many ways to put others before self: sharing a book that brings inspiration, laughing for joy, sharing wonderful meals, acknowledging our love for our husbands, being able to forgive the hurtful and remember the good. So I give thanks for Conni. We have years to go on earth, and then there's going to be a lot of laughter when we're united in heaven.

Carol Plaehn—Tacoma, Wash.

I n 1963 we moved into our new home with our four children. Our new neighbors had three children. We became friends immediately.

We have shared life's ups and downs. We have supported one another when faced with the death of a parent and the illness and death of my husband. We continue to share each other's tools and equipment, a garage, and our yards. Our children and grandchildren have continued that friendship and concern for one another. From this relationship I have learned that to be neighbors for 40 years and to have three generations of friendship is a gift from God. I value the relationship and thank God for it.

Virginia Paulson—Negaunee, Mich.

Rejoice in the Gentleness of the Day

by Gayle Aldrich

GENTLENESS, SOMETHING I CHERISH, IS TOO OFTEN LOST IN OUR WORLD. THE BIBLE TELLS US TO LET OUR GENTLENESS BE EVIDENT TO ALL.

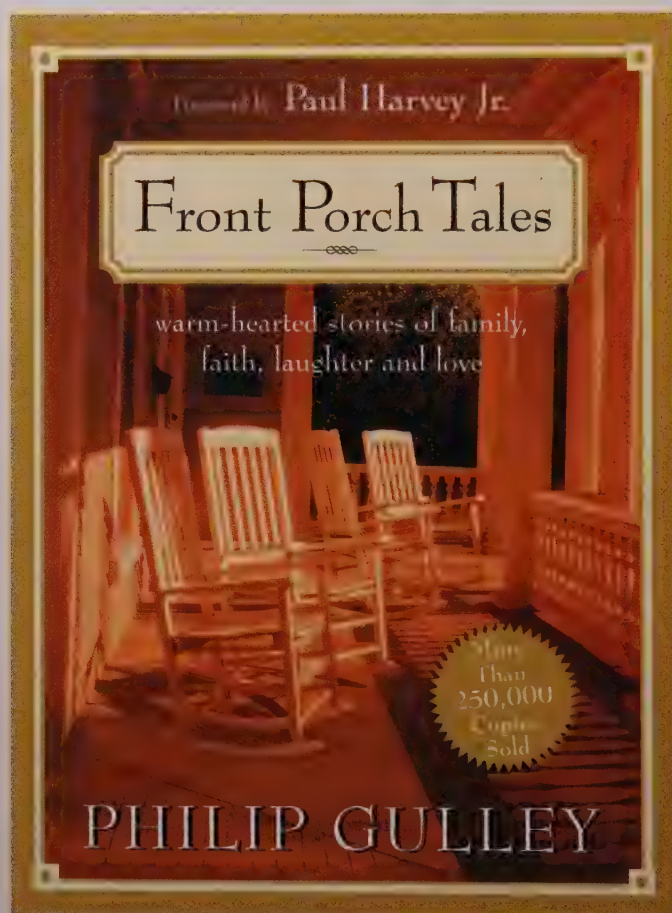
The other day while getting my hair cut, amidst combs, scissors, brushes, towels, smells, and people making their way from chair to sink to mirror chatting merrily away, I caught sight of a small infant carrier in the corner of the shop. I hadn't noticed it before, but now through a small opening in the top of the carrier, I saw a tiny face with eyes shut, oblivious to the bustle all around. Wrapped in the cozy confines of the infant seat, this baby was living in a completely different world from ours.

This unexpected sight caused me to pause a moment and think of the many small, quiet, gentle things around me that too often go unnoticed. I thanked God for the miracle of life, love, and simple moments of learning. Then I realized how something so simple had made my day. It doesn't take much, does it? A baby asleep in the corner, a fuzzy cat under the desk lamp, a piano teacher who tells you that if you're going to make a mistake, make a loud one.

The neatly framed sentences "Rejoice in the Lord Always, Again I Say, Rejoice!" and "Make a Joyful Noise unto the Lord" hung over the piano during my first years of lessons. If it weren't for the gentle persistence of teachers, parents, mentors, friends, and companions, where would we be today?

In the midst of a crazy, topsy-turvy world, I

thanked God for a small bundle sleeping in the corner of a hair salon. And I cherished this brief moment that gently reminded me to appreciate the ordinary things in life!



Front Porch Tales: Warm-Hearted Stories of Family, Faith, Laughter, and Love, by Philip Gulley (Harper-SanFrancisco, 2001). According to Philip Gulley, "We can go home again. But not if we tell the whole,

unvarnished truth.” In *Front Porch Tales* Gulley shares with extraordinary insight his gift of the ordinary. He takes the simplest everyday things, people, and places and turns them into rare lessons often overlooked in life’s daily moments.

Many people have good lives, but truly easy lives are hard to come by. In most of our lives there is some degree of wind and rain. Praying for deep roots may be what lets us maintain balance when things get tough. Gather on the front porch to read these warm-hearted stories of family, faith, laughter, and love.

Questions to consider as you read

What have you done today to make a difference in someone’s day? Has a simple act of kindness, a generous word, or a simple acknowledgment ever changed your day—or even your destiny? Is your faith growing and developing? Do you need to give yourself some time to grow? Is it time to reach out to someone else, or do you perhaps need to take some time to smell the roses?

Further reading

Flowers along the Path: Collected Wisdom for Your Spiritual Journey, by Esther Carls Dodgen (Barbour, 2001). Gathering spiritual flowers along the way and sharing them with others in our journey with God may enrich our own lives as well as the lives of others. We don’t know exactly what path or direction our lives will take, but wherever life leads, do you take time to smell the roses? At whatever stage of life you’re in, whatever phase in your faith development, it’s important to take time for your soul.

Sometimes what we need the most is the thing most within our reach. God uses people, places, and things as instruments in the orchestra of life. When we look back on our past, we find a melody, sometimes simple, sometimes intricate, even when we were not aware of the music at the time.

Simple Acts of Faith: Heartwarming Stories of One Life Touching Another, by Margaret Feinberg, with illustrations by Norman Rockwell (Harvest House, 2003). Norman Rockwell’s small-town America has become a landmark in modern history. The text of Margaret Feinberg’s *Simple Acts of Faith* accompanies Rockwell’s images with true and inspiring stories of people, past and present, whose simple acts of kindness and goodwill made a large difference to someone else. Rockwell’s images—some familiar, and

some less well known—bring charm, warmth, and an affection for everyday life that is sometimes forgotten in the hustle of our fast-paced, electronic culture.

Praying for deep roots may be what lets us maintain balance when things get tough.

These brief snippets remind us that there is power in everyday, ordinary, gentle goodwill. A cycle shop owner gives seven-year-old Lance Armstrong his first bike, introducing him to the world of biking. A nanny’s love and nurturing give young Winston Churchill the strength of a leader. A kindergarten teacher encourages one of her students, Charles Schulz, to be an artist. Generosity is not always measured in time, money, or effort; it is sometimes the faithful small things done that change the world.

Gayle Aldrich, a writer in Minneapolis, has been an advocate, actress, musician, editor, publicist, communications director, and yoga instructor.

Thank You, God, for Giving Us Sisters

by Kristin Svidersky

WE FLEW INTO YAOUNDÉ, CAMEROON, ON A WARM, HUMID NIGHT. AS WE WAITED FOR OUR LUGGAGE, THE SOUND OF FEMALE VOICES RAISED IN SONG FLOATED TO OUR EARS. We gradually became aware that this jubilant singing was our greeting. As we entered the waiting hall of the airport, we saw about 80 African women singing, proudly dressed in the light blue fabric of Women for Christ (WFC), the Lutheran women's organization. They hugged each of us, not missing a beat in their song. This was our beautiful introduction to the love in action that is African hospitality.

God was there first

Nineteen women from all over the United States traveled to Cameroon for two weeks in November 2003 to learn about the lives of women not only in Cameroon but in the ELCA companion synods of the Central African Republic, Liberia, Nigeria, Senegal, and Sierra Leone. When we agreed to make the trip, we all made a commitment to return home as advocates for the women in our companion synods.

Sitting with the African women and an interpreter, we listened to them share their struggles. They spoke of husbands taking several wives, girls forced into early marriage, violence against women, the difficulty of obtaining an education, and the poverty that envelops all these difficulties. We listened without pretending to have the answers. Just by being present with them, by worshiping and singing together, we communicated our solidarity with them in the name of Christ.

Our eyes and ears experienced a world that seems so very different from our own. But in our hearts we began to feel that these women really were our sisters. At that level all differences disappeared. This sentiment was underscored in the words shared by a wise missionary: "Whenever you go someplace new, take off your shoes, for you are on holy ground. God was there first."



Many women, like this fruit seller in Garoua, conduct business with children in tow.

Educate a woman, and you educate a nation

Despite people's struggles, the Africa we witnessed was far from a hopeless place. We were heartened to see many instances of Africans coming together to better their lives.

A constant theme during our many visits in Cameroon was the impact that education can have on the lives of women and, in turn, on a nation. We visited women's centers run by WFC in which young women are taught skills like knitting, sewing, English, and math. At Ngaoundéré University we learned about a committee that promotes women in higher education. And we heard about Women's Empowerment Centers at the Ministry of Women's Affairs, which offer women training in life skills and microfinance projects.

Education is the main defense against the terrible destruction caused by AIDS. In Cameroon, the infection rate is at least 12 percent, reaching 17 percent in some provinces. Tag Daga Association in Ngaoundéré received several thousand dollars in government grants to continue its community AIDS awareness program. The WFC group in Yaoundé is also promoting AIDS education.

Woman, stand up and speak for your rights

Perhaps the greatest blessing for us on this trip was the time we spent with women from the companion synods who traveled with us. Among the stories of faith that our African companions shared with us was the remarkable story of Martha Woheel from Liberia.

After living with war in her home country for over a decade, Martha had a vision in which she heard the words "Woman, stand up and speak for your rights." She was convinced that this vision was from God and shared it with women leaders in her church, who in turn contacted groups from other

denominations. News of the vision sparked a wildfire. Eventually, the Women in Peacebuilding Network was created, and almost 4,000 women of all faiths began to march for peace in their capital. They eventually won an audience with Liberia's president, which led to a ceasefire in Liberia in the fall of 2003—the first in 14 years (see the related article in the January/February 2004 issue of *LWT*).

Mountains never meet, but people can

The ELCA Companion Synods Program challenges those in each ELCA synod to develop long-term relationships with members of one other synod in the world and to learn to walk alongside these sisters and brothers. The personal relationships that result strengthen the worldwide church. We learn from each other and have a new opportunity to thank God for the diversity on our planet. Mountains can never meet, as an African saying goes, but people can. And meeting these African sisters enriched our lives beyond our expectations.

Kristin Svidersky is a member of First Lutheran Church in Fargo, North Dakota.



The seven African women who traveled with Svidersky's group. *Standing, left to right:* Madeleine Soumou (Cameroon), Boussou Sarr (Senegal), Ani Nzolaninyi (Nigeria), Martha Woheel (Liberia), Naomi Gislambe (Nigeria); *kneeling:* Marthe Satou (Cameroon), Marie Aimee (Senegal)

Session 9

Prosper in the Gospel

by Robin Mattison



Study Text

Philippians 4:2–23

Theme Verse

“Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” (Philippians 4:6)

Overview

Paul and the Philippians were very close. They had shared friendship, prayer, proclamation, struggle, and financial support over a number of years. Now, in light of his impending execution, Paul addresses four troubling situations before closing his letter.

First, Paul lends his insight and aid to two women leaders who are at odds, thus imperiling unity among the believers. Second, Paul reassures the anxious believers that God can supply more of their needs than he, Paul, ever could. Third, Paul addresses Epaphroditus’s suffering and the community’s support for him; his illness meant that Paul’s thank-you note for their help several months before had never reached them. Finally, Paul uses the closing of his letter to show the believers that they may rejoice, for the gospel is already spreading in the emperor’s household! A warm closing further solidifies their relationship.

Also included in this session is a summary of the major features we have seen as common material in

all three letters: 1 Thessalonians, Philemon, and Philippians.

Opening

Paul begins his concluding comments to the Philippians (Philippians 4:4) by urging them always to rejoice in the Lord. All told, he urges them to rejoice more than 15 times in this one epistle. If we add related words—*exaltation*, *boasting*, and *glory*—the letter contains 24 such references.

As we have learned, boasting in Christ and exalting, praising, glorifying, and rejoicing in God are how the Philippians responded to evidence of God’s work in the present. As is clear from Paul’s rejoicing in prison, his understanding of *joy* is not the same as our understanding, which is closer to *happiness*. The modern understanding of happiness is of self-satisfaction at a moment of relaxation, the satisfaction of a job well done, or delight in one’s relationships and situation in life. Joy for Paul is the confidence in God that there is a powerful resolution to the impossible difficulties of human sin and death.

Gather your reflections on your prayer journals over the past month. What evidence have you seen in others of imitations of this dying and rising pattern that Paul saw everywhere? Where did you discern

- the sinful confronted with their idolatry and relieved of it by grace?
- those imprisoned or limited in one way or another

being helped by other believers?

- the rescue of the very ill so that they could return to their vocations?
- the humble regarding of others as better than themselves to the benefit of all?
- people saved from bondage to habits that had become their master?
- believers confronting people with their idolatry and changing their minds?
- amazing proclamation through the Spirit of Jesus and the resurrection?
- those who mourn rejoicing that the dead are safely asleep in Christ?

Discuss what you have seen, and then give thanks to God for these evidences that God through Christ is liberating us all from bondage to sin and death.

Euodia and Syntyche, Women Leaders

Read Philippians 4:2–3. These two short verses about two women leaders contain the last athletic metaphor in Philippians (the word translated “struggled” at 4:3 in the NRSV). You may wish to go back to the beginning of the letter and review the other athletic references: 1:27, 30; 2:16; 3:10–14.

Paul found it appropriate to use such language for these women leaders in Philippi. Essentially, he said that they had been fighting like gladiators beside him for the sake of the gospel.¹ Few women, if any, would have been gladiators, but Paul is using the image to make clear that he saw the proclamation of the good news and the women’s part in it as a battle, a fight to the death. Their combat was with the forces of death, sin, and idolatry that take people captive and enslave them.

Philippians 1:1 shows us that the Philippian assembly was given order by bishops and deacons. Those who held these offices might have served as

ONE BIG RUN-ON SENTENCE

You may have noticed that we did not begin this session according to the NRSV’s chapter divisions—our study text begins not at the very beginning of chapter 4, at verse 1, but at verse 2. The Greek original contains no chapter headings, no verse references, and in fact no spaces between the words or punctuation! The entire Letter to the Philippians was written in what we’d call run-on, capital-letter style. For example, here is what verse 2 would look like if it were in English: IURGEEUODIAANDI-URGESYNTYCHETOBE OF THE SAME MIND IN THE LORD

Because of this ancient style, interpreters of Scripture need to decide where the logical breaks are or where the topics change. It is my judgment that Philippians 4:1 (“stand firm”) completes the concern for safety set up in Philippians 3:1 (“for you it is a safeguard”). The next section begins at 4:2 with Euodia and Syntyche.

organizers over or between the house assemblies, and they might also have carried out other administrative or pastoral functions. It is not until this chapter that Paul gives us some names to put to those faithful leaders: Euodia (YOO-dee-uh or yoo-oh-DEE-ah, meaning “prosperity”), Syntyche (SOON-ta-kee or soon-TOO-kay, meaning “providence”), a “loyal companion” (in Greek, the name Syzygus [SOO-zi-gus or SOO-zoo-gos] means “loyal companion”), and Clement. We are not sure which offices were held by Euodia and Syntyche, but it is possible that either woman served as a bishop or a deacon. It is also clear that Paul has great confidence in this loyal companion’s being able to help these leading women be of the same mind in the Lord.

(That phrase, “be of the same mind,” was also used prominently at 2:1–6 and 3:17–21.)

Paul clearly has a great deal of respect for these women leaders. He has been very negative about three groups of people in this letter: those who preach Christ to afflict him (1:15), the circumcisers (3:2), and the enemies of Christ whose god is their belly (3:18–19).

1. Is it likely that any of these problems were what prevented a common mind between these women? Why or why not? Look closely at 4:2–3. For what did he commend them, and what blessing have they obtained? Did Paul object to any particular view or action of theirs? Did he take sides? Was their leadership worth enough for Paul to ask someone to help resolve the tension between them?

We are left to wonder what kind of disagreement these prominent women, assigned to similar functions, would have got into. It is more likely that the disagreement was over something like an administrative issue than that it was related to the core of the community’s faith. Here is an imaginary reconstruction.

Euodia and Syntyche have been serving as proclaimers of the gospel with Paul. The assembly has

grown enough that there is a need for another house assembly on the Lord’s day. Although the two women have been a team,² they are now disagreeing about where the assembly should meet, as well as who should set up, maintain, and fund the assembly. In the indecision left by Paul’s absence and their own struggle with persecution, all the negative things that Paul warned against in Philippians 2:1–5 (selfish ambition, conceit, focus on self-interest) have been showing up in these two women.

2. Divide into three groups: Euodia and her supporters, Syntyche and her supporters, and Syzygus (the “loyal companion”) and other concerned members of the community. Each group will spend a few minutes planning what they want to say and who will be their representative.

Euodia will want to make a gospel case that her house is the right one for the new assembly, and Syntyche will want to argue the same for her house. They may want to talk about how eager they are to run for the prize (Philippians 3:12–16) and identify how helpful they’ve been already as patrons (4:15–20). Syzygus and company will want to look at Philippians 2:1–11, 3:7–11, and 4:3–9 for material to use in appealing to these two women to be of one mind.

SIBLINGS IN THE GOSPEL

When Paul chose the Greek word *adelphoi* to address the community, he did so deliberately in order to invoke something like the relationship among offspring of the same parents. His aim was to be inclusive, since the word meant all

offspring, male and female. When the interpreters of the NRSV chose to translate this word as “brothers and sisters,” they made clear that women are to be counted among the group. This is important, for with that translation there can be no doubt about their inclusion.

However, translating *adelphoi*

“brothers and sisters” makes conspicuous what Paul was trying to obscure. If in Christ there is no “male and female” (Galatians 3:28), then there are not any “brothers and sisters” either. I suggest an alternate word, *siblings*. “Rejoice, siblings!” is perhaps closer to what Paul meant.

When you are ready, Euodia and Syntyche will speak first, then Syzygus. Then all may contribute.

How close to (or how far from) Pauline values do you think your arguments and persuasions were?

Peace Now!

Read Philippians 4:4–9. Paul knows what effect drawing out the issue between Euodia and Syntyche will have on the whole group. He did the same with Philemon. Philippians 4:4–9, then, provides a respite for the assembly, who would be hearing the letter read aloud.

Despite Paul's and Syzygus's best efforts, Euodia and Syntyche might not resolve the problem. Perhaps tension in the community would continue. So Paul points to a resource much larger than himself—rejoicing in the Lord. To rejoice in the Lord is to claim that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (2:11) and not Paul, Euodia, Syntyche, Syzygus, or any member of the community.

Paul does still have confidence in the community. The NRSV translates the Greek word *epieikes* as gentleness (4:5), but that removes an important element—*forbearance*—that Paul is stressing because the day of the Lord (the end of time) is imminent. Forbearance, tolerance, and patience—better translations of the Greek—are important for all believers. If Euodia and Syntyche are not forbearing with one another, how could nonbelievers expect that the assembly would be forbearing toward them?

Forbearance is the attitude that permits, we might say, physical, emotional, and psychic “space” in relationships. Forbearance (disengagement, space, 4:5) and love (engagement, nearness, 1:16; 2:1–2), along with the qualities named in 4:8 (true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellence, worthy of praise), would be enough to shape the assembly's witness to Philippi.

3. Have you ever experienced, in the midst of prayer or reflection, a moment when you received from God an insight that showed you that your desires were falling short of forbearance? Perhaps this was a time when you saw that you were not allowing the space or patience needed for things to unfold according to God's time line and plan rather than your own. Share this experience, if you like.

Your Sharing in the Gospel

Read Philippians 4:10–20. These verses are evidence of the loving, long-standing relationship between Paul and the Philippians, which he mentioned also in 1:5 and 2:25. The Philippians were Paul's most loyal supporters. The abrupt beginning of 4:10, “now at last you have revived your concern for me” (literally, “now that your care for me has bloomed again”), suggests that this portion may have been a thank-you note that went along to Philippi with the rest of the letter. Verses 10–20 may even have been an earlier, undelivered thank-you note that Paul had now revised, since it was finally going to be delivered. Our best guess is that Epaphroditus's serious illness had delayed its delivery.

Paul's reflection in 4:11–13 reaffirms what he had written at 3:8. Plenty or want are the same—incidental to the call—in the same way that life and death are incidental to the call in 1:21: “living is Christ and dying is gain.” From this perspective, he can affirm the Philippians' gift without its being necessary for his mission.

Paul has a strong sense of interdependence with the Philippians—not dependence on them or independence from them, but a balanced sense of interdependence. In the same way, the Philippians' charismatic relationship with God means they need an interdependent relationship with Paul—neither dependent on him nor independent from him. So the Philippians' gift may have been necessary for the

mission God assigned the *Philippians*: Paul's approach means that the gifts the Philippians provide would profit them as much as or even more than him, for their gifts confirm that they too are not running in vain, that they too are acting out the fact that their names are written in the book of life (4:3).

This understanding of giving and receiving kept Paul free of the patronage system that pervaded Greco-Roman culture. This system would have made him beholden to his donors in his decision making. In addition to holding and promoting this attitude toward benevolence, Paul earned his own keep by working with his hands (1 Corinthians 4:12; 2 Corinthians 11:9–11) and encouraged others to do so, too (1 Thessalonians 4:11).

4. Discuss Paul's thinking about giving and receiving as paying an ongoing debt to God. How might this approach help us understand our own giving and receiving, including our giving to the church?

Go Deeper—Giving and Receiving

Paul's writing about the ongoing relationship between him and the Philippians is not simply good, effective communication. In 2 Corinthians 8:1–9:15, he commends the Philippians (referring to them as "the Macedonians") and points to their generosity as an example to the recalcitrant Corinthians. Read the passage in 2 Corinthians and see how it reinforces Paul's sense of giving as paying a debt owed to God.

The Lord Is Near

We have seen how Paul's view of the end time influences his good news. We also know, however, that the end time has not yet come, even though Paul expected it any day.

5. Do you think there would be any advantage to our living "as if" the end time is near, for the sake of energy for mission, forbearance, and proclamation? What might Paul see as the danger of imagining that the end time is far off?

Take a Letter

For our last letter, imagine that you are a first-century woman who is an imitator of Paul. You receive a letter from a group of women who are worshipers of Diana, the virgin huntress. They are really astounded about your new faith, and curious, too. So you must persuade them to hear and accept Paul's gospel for the Gentiles.

They ask you six questions. Have one or two people (or more, depending on the size of your group) work on each question. (You may wish to refer to some of the Scripture references cited below as you form your response, but do not feel compelled to consider each passage cited.) Or your group may choose to focus on two or three of the questions.

The followers of Diana

To the assembly of the women called imitators of Paul in Philippi.

Greetings and health.

We are a small group of women of the cult of Diana who live near you. We have heard that Paul, a Jew, came to you with a message nine months ago. We heard that he told you that there is a God who is a living God who has raised up from the dead a persecuted man named Jesus, and by this action this God has saved people from death. We have been confident that we will gain a superior status at death through Diana, and so are astounded to hear this. We have many questions.

1. This Jesus was executed in Palestine, so why did Paul sail the Mediterranean to speak of a foreign God to us? Is Paul going to teach you the Jewish Scripture and laws?

2. *What did Paul say this Jesus taught, and what did he do? Why has he had such an effect on you? We've even heard a rumor about the free behavior of men and women, slaves and masters, together in your religion. Is that true? What can you tell us about that?*

3. *How did this God become a living God to you? We hear that you are saying that rejoicing is like being exalted. What does that mean when you are suffering? Does that mean that the end is soon? Why?*

4. *Our friend Persis said she can pick out Christians because of the way they act in public. Can you tell us four things you do differently in public since this Paul came to you? Why do you do them? Difference isn't always good, you know. It can get you into trouble.*

5. *We know every religion involves some things that believers do to show that they are bound together. What things like this do you do, and why? We don't live very far away, so maybe after you write back, you could come and show us.*

6. *We're curious, particularly because we hear that^{*} this Paul is in prison. How do you feel about that? What if he dies? What will you do then? We wouldn't want to put a lot of stock into a religion of dead people.*

Here are some places in the letters we have studied that will help you form your response. Again, you need not consider each passage cited.

Question 1

- Proclamation and conversion: 1 Thessalonians 1:4–10; 2:1–12; Philemon 10–16; Philippians 3:4–11
- The relation of Paul's former life as a leader among the Jews to his life in Christ: Philippians 3:1–11; Galatians 1:11–24

Question 2

- God is acting again: 1 Thessalonians 1:1–5, 9; 2:13; 3:11–13; 4:3–9, 14–16; 5:9, 17, 23–24; Philemon 3–4;

Philippians 1:2–3, 7, 28; 2:5–6, 9–11, 13, 27; 3:9, 14–15; 4:6–7, 19

- Everyone's witness is valued: Philemon 8–17; Philippians 2:1–5
- The mind or regard or thinking of Christ, Paul, and believers: Philippians 1:9, 16, 27; 2:1–11; 3:8–15, 4:2, 7–8

Question 3

- The closeness of the end time: 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 4:14–17; 5:1–11; Philippians 2:16–18; 4:5
- The blamelessness of the believers at the last day by virtue of Christ: 1 Thessalonians 3:13; Philippians 1:9–11; 2:12–16
- Athletic metaphors: Philippians 1:27, 30; 2:16; 3:12–14; 4:3

Question 4

- Rejoicing: 1 Thessalonians 1:6; 2:19–20; 5:16; Philemon 7; Philippians 1:4, 18–26; 2:2, 16–18, 28–29; 3:1; 4:1, 4, 10, 19–20
- Sharing and serving as co-workers in the gospel: 1 Thessalonians 2:8; Philemon 1–2, 6, 17, 23; Philippians 1:5, 7, 26; 2:1, 25; 3:10, 20; 4:2–3, 10, 14–18
- Living in a culture that does not share believers' values: 1 Thessalonians 4:1–12; Philippians 2:15

Question 5

- Greeting believers and giving thanks: 1 Thessalonians 1:2–3; 3:9; 5:18; Philemon 4–7; Philippians 1:1–7; 4:6
- The assemblies' support of the missionaries: Philemon 10–14; Philippians 4:10–18
- Giving closing greetings: 1 Thessalonians 5:23–28; Philemon 23–25; Philippians 4:21–23

Question 6

- Imitation of Christ and Paul: 1 Thessalonians 1:6–10; 2:13–16; Philippians 2:1–11; 3:17–21

- Suffering for the gospel: 1 Thessalonians 1:6–10; 2:13–16; 3:1–7; Philemon 1, 10, 23; Philippians 1:12–30; 3:21; 4:11–14
- Death: 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18; Philippians 1:20–26

Closing

Paul closed his letter to the Philippians in an amazing way: He sent them greetings from their siblings in the emperor's household! You will remember that Paul began by saying that his imprisonment had served to spread the gospel. Here is evidence that that has already happened: Even while Paul is in prison, members of the emperor's household are being converted. Paul is certain that God is always doing more than one thing at a time, always bringing resurrection out of apparent defeat. To the very last moment Paul affirms that the interventions of God are present and powerful.

In a final blessing, he confirms that the grace (humility, forbearance, commitment, and obedience) of the Lord Jesus Christ is the gift of God to the breath (spirit) of God within them.

We, too, have come to the end of our study of these three thankful letters of Paul to the Gentiles. Paul was confident that what God had done for Paul, God will do for every Christian. Though his situation was still uncertain, it is clear that he had no anxiety about his death. This may be his final communication to the Philippians.

Give thanks for the work of faith, forbearing labor of love, and steadfastness of hope in the gospel of our sisters in Christ who are Women of the ELCA. God has chosen them, and God has chosen you! Pray for them as they pray for you!

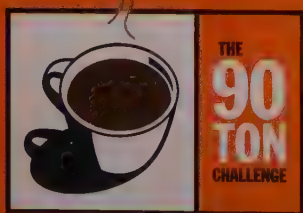
Finally, greet one another with a warm embrace, saying, "I thank God for you!"

Rev. Dr. Robin Mattison is associate professor of New Testament and Greek at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia.

Notes

1. Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (London: Hendrickson, 1998), 238–42.
2. Carolyn Osiek, "Philippians," in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 246–47.

The Women of the ELCA are moving mountains. (And we're not just talking about coffee).



Pour Justice to the Brim

Move mountains, pour justice. Challenge your parish to join the 90-ton LWR Coffee Project today. Call or log on for more info.

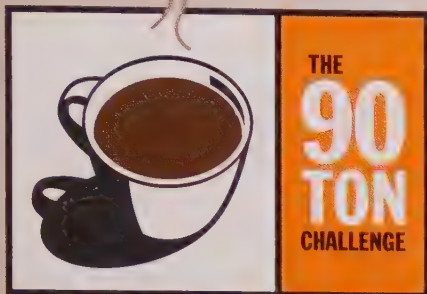
As the mountain of coffee purchased through the LWR Coffee Project grows, so do the benefits to the farmers. Fairer prices, women's empowerment, investments into communities, more environmentally friendly farming methods. As the Women of the ELCA have proven, there's no stopping a good idea...or the women behind it.

lwr.org/coffee

1-800-LWR-LWR-2



Equal Exchange is our partner in the LWR Coffee Project.



KEEP POURING IT ON!

by Brenda Meier

Pour Justice to the Brim

In the October 2003 issue of *Lutheran Woman Today* magazine, "Pour Justice to the Brim: The 90-Ton Challenge" was launched. This one-year challenge is aimed at doubling the amount of fair-trade coffee purchased through the Lutheran World Relief (LWR) Coffee Project from 45 tons (the amount purchased through the project in 2002) to 90 tons in the period from October 2003 to October 2004.

Since the launching of the 90-Ton Challenge, 41 tons of fair-trade coffee have been purchased through the LWR Coffee Project (as of March 11, when this article was being printed).

Have you already accepted the Challenge? Tell us your fair-trade story. We are compiling a collection of stories about individual and group efforts for possible use in a future issue of *LWT*. Not yet involved? It's not too late! Visit www.lwr.org/coffee for ideas and resources. Call 800-LWR-LWR-2 for brochures, posters, and fliers.

Brenda Meier is the communication associate for parish projects and partnerships at Lutheran World Relief in Baltimore, Md.

God Is For Every Day

Stories and Songs for Children

One of the best gifts that you can give your children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews is a **spiritual** one.

The "God Is For Every Day" CD, Cassette tape and book all include the following 8 themes:

Jesus Is My Friend
Lord, I'm So Grumpy
Rejoice in IT!
The Best Gifts

God Loves the Animals!
Baby Names
The Offering Song
Grains of Sand

Each theme includes a story and song, and each story and song has its own short introduction. The book includes piano music for all songs, as well as the introductions and stories for each song.

JoySoul Corporation is committed to the spiritual growth of all children.

Toll-free phone: 1-866-569-8486 e-mail: JoySoul@earthlink.net www.JoySoul.com





Journey with Women of the ELCA as we continue to respond to our 2002-2005 triennium theme, "Listen, God is calling."

Grab a friend, come as a group, or simply treat yourself to

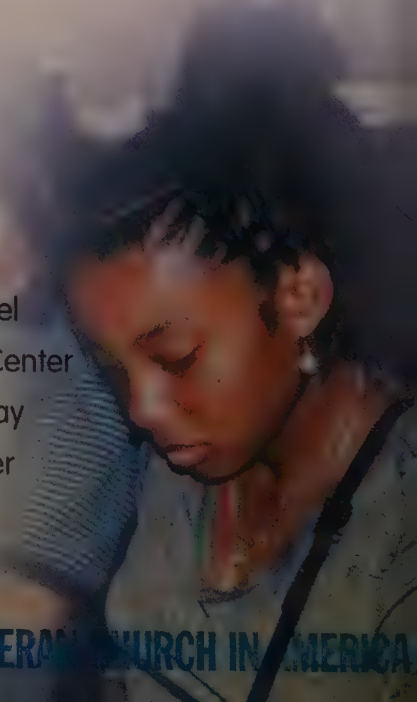
"Saying Yes! the next step"

Plan now on attending one of these retreat-style events, held at a variety of locations across the country. See below for a location near you!

Don't miss your chance to meet other women of the church, be uplifted, and be inspired. The adventure begins on Friday at 7 p.m. and ends by noon on Sunday.

A \$65 registration fee includes lunch on Saturday, materials, and break-time refreshments. Hotel accommodations and transportation are additional (special hotel rates have been negotiated).

For more information and to register on-line go to www.womenoftheelca.org or get information and registration forms by calling 800-638-3522, ext 2741. Most major credit cards accepted.



April 30-May 2

July 9-11

October 1-3

November 5-7

January 7-9, 2005

Baltimore

Minneapolis

Miami

Denver

Los Angeles

Sheraton Inner Harbor Hotel

Minneapolis Marriott City Center

Miami Marriott Biscayne Bay

Denver Marriott Tech Center

Marina del Rey Marriott



GRACE NOTES

One of the Clan

by Linda Post Bushkofsky

THE WORD GENTLENESS CONJURES UP IMAGES OF SWEETNESS AND SOFTNESS, OF INNOCENCE AND BABIES. I'D LIKE TO CONSIDER ANOTHER DEFINITION OF GENTLENESS, ONE DERIVED FROM THE LATIN ROOT, GENTILIS, WHICH MEANS "OF THE SAME CLAN." I like to think that Paul, in calling us to let our gentleness be evident to all, is calling us to let everyone know why we do the things we do.

A typical woman of the church is busy with many service projects. She serves meals once a month at the local soup kitchen. She donates groceries to the food pantry. She tutors an adolescent in an after-school program. She visits a homebound member of her congregation, and she knits prayer shawls. Those who know this woman might think how kind and gentle she is, helping others as she does. And it's true. She is kind and gentle, but then, so are many other good people who are not Christian.

What sets this woman apart is her reason for doing these good works. She is part of God's clan. And because she is part of God's family, she follows Jesus' direction to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to love her neighbor as herself. She doesn't do good works simply for the sake of good works. She does these things because Jesus calls us to do these things. In the words of the Women of the ELCA mission statement, she is acting on her faith in Jesus Christ.

Heeding Paul's exhortation to let our gentleness be evident to all, this typical woman of the church needs to let others know why she serves, donates, tutors, visits, knits. It's not enough to simply *do* them. She needs to let others know *why* she does them.

Some would prefer to be silent evangelists, if there is such a thing. They are uncomfortable speaking of their faith, especially outside the four walls of the church building. But "Mum's the word" is not the rallying cry of a people who are called to make disciples of all nations!

Consider, then, how you and your unit of Women of the ELCA are making your gentleness evident to all, letting others know of your clan. Many salutary service groups in our communities are doing great things. What sets your unit apart from them?

For instance, if your unit holds a drive collecting socks for the homeless, let it be known within your congregation that you are collecting socks in order to follow Jesus' instruction to care for others who have no clothes and no home. When you present the 500 pairs of white socks to the homeless shelter and the local newspaper sends a reporter, let the reporter know that you have done this in response to God's love shown to us in Jesus. If your unit sponsors an advocacy effort like writing letters to your state senator regarding a piece of legislation that would provide funding for a school breakfast program, let the senator know that you are writing as a Christian, following Jesus' instruction to care for those who cannot care for themselves.

These are but two ideas. You'll have countless more. Let your gentleness be evident to everyone. Let others know of your clan.

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director of Women of the ELCA.



AMEN!

Known by Our Gentleness

by Catherine Malotky

THE TRUTH IS, GOD, I'M WAY TOO INVESTED IN WHAT OTHER PEOPLE THINK OF ME. SO IT'S HARD TO HEAR PAUL EXHORT THE PHILIPPIANS TO LET THEIR GENTLENESS BE KNOWN TO EVERYONE (PHILIPPIANS 4:5).

Like many women, I've been raised to please and nurture, and, above all, to not make waves. My antennae are always at work, reading the souls surrounding me, gauging my responses so I can fit in. I try to be a good person, and I'd love to be remembered for having been a gentle person. The trouble with this strategy for living is that too often I find myself just plain tired, or steamed, or afraid. When I'm wrung out, I don't want to be known by anyone.

And when I'm wrung out, it's hard to accept that you would love me enough to send Jesus to be with me. It seems that being known is a goal for other, more secure people—people who think on true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent things—people who are more Christlike, who deserve him more.

In him we see you most clearly—your love for us, your willingness to risk and sacrifice for us, your justice, and your mercy. Perhaps Jesus desired to be known to others as gentle, but his life was not what I would have sought if I wanted to cultivate such an identity. He traveled a lot on foot. He was a carpenter, not a powerful CEO or an influential movie star. He didn't live in the right neighborhood or have wildly successful children who could point back to his excellent parenting. He was often in trouble with the law.

He did hang out with prostitutes and tax collectors. His best friends made their living fishing. He flipped tables in the temple and chided the Pharisees. The church leaders always seemed to be rankled by him. By the end he was persona non grata—and was crucified because of it.

So what do you mean when you invite us to be known as gentle? Maybe it's less about being an upright example and more about being sure of whose we are. Maybe when we believe deep in our bones that we are the work of your hand, then we take on a gentleness that flows from deep within. Maybe when our antennae aren't working quite so hard, when we aren't distracted by a desire to measure up or fit in, we are able to see what a gift you have created in each of us and look on others with a spirit of gentleness.

What if, God, we each believed this about ourselves? Maybe if we are at home in ourselves and with each other because we are yours, beloved and blessed, the world, which operates so often out of fear, would be able to sense it. What if our gentleness came from a sure and certain hope that we are good enough and have something to offer the world? Is that the idea? Amen.

Catherine Malotky serves the ELCA Board of Pensions as representative to several synods in the Upper Midwest. An ordained pastor, she has also been an editor, teacher, parish pastor, and retreat leader.

READER CALL TOPICS AND DEADLINES

Mail or e-mail to *LWT* Editorial Office

September 2004

In what ways does your daily life give evidence of God's presence?

Due May 14, 2004

October 2004

Describe a time when you masked your true self. What did you learn from that experience?

Due June 10, 2004

November 2004

Tell us about a relationship or an experience that taught you something about forgiveness.

Due July 10, 2004

IDEANET TOPICS AND DEADLINES

E-mail to IdeaNet@elca.org

September 2004

Tell us about community service projects that your women's group organizes or participates in.

Due May 14, 2004

October 2004

Tell us about an idea that has enriched your group's Bible study.

Due June 10, 2004

November 2004

In what ways does your congregation or women's group celebrate All Saints' Day or other days honoring the saints who have gone before us?

Due July 10, 2004

ATTENTION, POTENTIAL IDEANET CONTRIBUTORS!

Share your great ideas and successes so that we can all learn from one another. Send your ideas on what works for your group or congregation to *Lutheran Woman Today*. You can write about a specific topic (listed on this page in each issue), or send in miscellaneous ideas that will be considered for occasional potpourri columns. We'd love to hear from you. Send in your IdeaNet contribution today!

SUBSCRIPTION OFFICE

Change of address, problems related to your subscription, and subscription orders must be addressed to our publisher, Augsburg Fortress.

Please do not contact the editorial office for subscription matters.

800-328-4648

LWT Subscription Order Center

Box 1209

Minneapolis, MN 55440-1209

subscriptions@augburgfortress.org

Audiotape and Braille editions

800-426-0115, ext. 502

Permission to reprint articles

800-421-0239 copyright@augburgfortress.org

Advertising Inquiries

Elizabeth O'Hara, Account Executive

100 S. Fifth Street, Suite 700

Minneapolis, MN 55402

800-426-0115, ext. 417 oharae@augburgfortress.org

LWT Editorial Office

For editorial feedback, magazine promotion questions, or freelance submissions, write:

LWT Editorial Office

Women of the ELCA

8765 W. Higgins Rd.

Chicago, IL 60631-4189

800-638-3522, ext. 2743

lwt@elca.org www.elca.org/wo/lwt

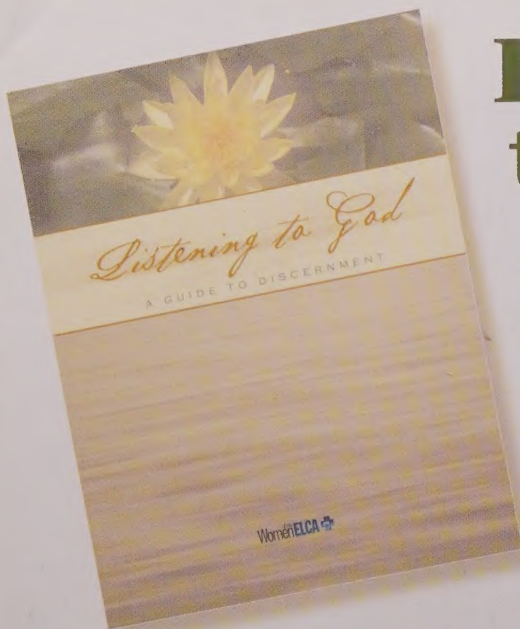
Bible Study Resource Orders

Bible Study Leader Guides, Companion Bibles, etc.

800-328-4648 www.augsburgfortress.org

Bible Study On-line Discussion

<http://webboard.elca.org:8080/~woboard>



Listening to God: A Guide to Discernment

Listening to God: A Guide to Discernment, by Debra K. Farrington, is the newest resource from Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America that responds to the 2002-2005 triennium theme, "Listen, God Is Calling." Are you hearing God's call? Do you know what you are being called to do or be? This resource introduces you and the women in your group to several

key spiritual practices that will help you become better able to readily discern God's hopes and desires for your life.

Listening to God can be used as a congregational unit program, as part of a conference or cluster event, or even as a short retreat. Facilitators will appreciate the clear, step-by-step directions for group use that include suggestions on timing, materials needed, prayer, and so on. Each of the six sessions takes approximately 90 minutes and can be conducted over six weeks, over the course of weekend—whatever suits your needs.

This resource derives from two of Farrington's recent books, *Hearing with the Heart: A Gentle Guide to Discerning God's Will for Your Life* (Jossey-Bass), and *Learning to Hear with the Heart: Meditations for Discerning God's Will* (Jossey-Bass). These make wonderful complements to this resource and are available from Augsburg Fortress and local bookstores nationwide.

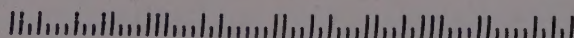
Listening to God would also make a great gift for the special women in your life. Order *Listening to God* from Augsburg Fortress: 800-328-4648, or www.augsburgfortress.org. \$6.95; ISBN 6-0001-9376-9.

Women^{of the} ELCA

the magazine of Women^{of the} ELCA

#BXBLBU ****AUTO**3-DIGIT 947
#335629467#0503 LWT45M 20
GRADUATE THEOLOGICAL UNION
LIBRARY SERIALS DEPT
2400 RIDGE RD
BERKELEY CA 94709-1212

384
003
702
##



Please direct all changes of address to Augsburg Fortress, Publishers (see inside back cover).